

# AntiCALVIN Fatalism, Free- Will And Determinism

Earl Conee and  
Theodore Sider

# CHAPTER 1: Fatalism

## Earl Conee

### Introduction

Open possibilities are open to choice or chance. This status matters to us. We are hopeful about the positive possibilities. We worry about the threatening ones. We take an open possibility to be unsettled, up-in-the-air.

In contrast, fated things are out of anyone's control, bound to be. This status matters differently to us. If

something fated looks bad, we try to resign ourselves to it. If something fated looks good, we are glad about it. We take anything fated to be a given.

Some philosophers have tried to prove that all of reality—everything that ever happens, every entity that ever exists, and every condition that things are ever in—all was forever fated to be as it is. This is the doctrine of metaphysical fatalism.

There are several things to set aside right away,

because metaphysical fatalism does not say or imply that they are true. First, metaphysical fatalism is not about being fated by the Fates. The Fates are three ancient Greek mythical goddesses who were believed to decide human destiny. No philosopher thinks that those goddesses exist and determine our lives. Philosophers agree that nothing is fated by the Fates.

Metaphysical fatalism says that there is a kind of

necessity to every actual thing. This does not imply that ‘everything happens for a reason’. Metaphysical fatalism is about an impersonal necessity, not a reason or purpose. Also, metaphysical fatalism does not imply that we have a destiny where certain things would have to happen to us, no matter what. Rather, it implies that we must be exactly as we are, in exactly the situations that we are actually in. Furthermore, this fatalism does not imply that effort is

futile. It allows that some efforts cause improvements— although it does imply that both the efforts and the resulting improvements were fated. Fatalists acknowledge that we do not always know what is going to happen. They say that everything in the past, present, and future must be as it is, regardless of what anyone knows about what will be. Moreover, metaphysical fatalism does not tell us to be ‘fatalistic’, that is, to regard the future with

resignation or submission to fate. No particular attitude is automatically justified. Fatalism even allows a cheerful optimism to be justified—maybe things are fated to go well and attitudes of resignation and submission do no good.

Finally, the necessity that metaphysical fatalists attribute to everything is not the necessity of causes to produce their effects. Clearly, many things are determined in advance by physical laws and prior conditions. If everything

that ever happens is determined in this way, then what philosophers call determinism is true.<sup>1</sup> The melting of some ice that is heated above water's freezing point is inevitable. This seems enough to say that the heating makes the melting 'fated' to occur. But the truth of determinism would not be even partial support for metaphysical fatalism. Fatalism is not about being physically or causally determined. It is about something more abstract, something that

does not depend on how things go in nature. Determinists hold that the present and future are causally determined by the past and the physical laws, but there could have been a different past or different laws. The metaphysical fatalists' view is that, even if determinism is not true, there are no open possibilities at any point in history. Their claim is that each thing in the past, present, and future has always been fixed and settled. It all must be

exactly as it is, whether or not it was causally determined. Metaphysical fatalists think that the sheer presence of anything in the world gives the thing a necessity. Why? Fatalists present arguments—lines of reasoning—to try to prove their thesis. Let's look at some main fatalist arguments and see how well they work.

## The Sea Battle

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle gives

us our first argument. Here is a short story about some predictions.

A sea battle may well take place tomorrow. Today, someone predicts that it will happen tomorrow and someone else predicts that it won't. Neither of the predictors knows what is going to happen. They are both just guessing.

That is the whole story. It is not a work of art. But our Aristotelian fatalist uses it to argue for something profound.

The Sea Battle argument

begins as follows.

First Assumption: Either the prediction that the battle will happen is true, or the prediction that it won't happen is true.

This First Assumption seems sensible, although it will not go unchallenged. Let's continue with the reasoning.

Second Assumption: If a statement is true, then it has to be true.

This too initially seems right, though again we'll think more about it. From these two assumptions the fatalist

derives the following.

Initial Conclusion: Whichever prediction about the battle is true, it has to be true.

If a prediction has to be true, then it describes a necessary fact. So now the fatalist derives this.

Second Conclusion: Whether or not a battle will take place at sea tomorrow, whichever will happen is something that has to be—it is necessary.

This conclusion is fatalistic. And there is more to come. So far, the Sea Battle argument is just about one

predicted event. Metaphysical fatalism is about everything. A conclusion about everything can be reached by generalizing from the reasoning about the sea battle. Nothing in the story makes its battle especially prone to having the status of being settled in advance. So, to the extent that the argument about the battle succeeds, an unrestricted conclusion about everything else seems to be equally well supported.

One less-than-universal

aspect of the story is that predictions have been made. That is not crucial, though. The argument does not use the predicting as a basis for implying the necessity of what is predicted. If the argument succeeds, then it would be the reality of the situation that makes the predicted fact necessary, not the predicting of it. Thus, the whole truth about the future would be necessary, whether predicted or not. So it looks as though, if the fatalist succeeds in proving

the Second Conclusion, then there is no real further obstacle to proving the following.

General Fatalistic Conclusion:

Whatever will be, has to be.

Before evaluating the Sea

Battle argument, we should note two further things about it. First, battling involves choice. Frequently, fatalism is regarded as being about our having freedom of choice. Choice is an important focus for fatalistic arguments, because choices are some of our favorite examples of

open possibilities. We think that there are free choices that really could have gone either way.<sup>2</sup> But the fatalists' conclusion is not limited to excluding freedom of choice. The General Fatalistic Conclusion asserts that the whole future is necessary. If this conclusion is right, then it applies as well to the things that are supposed to be matters of chance according to science. For instance, according to contemporary physics, the time of the radioactive

decay of a uranium atom is not physically determined. Two uranium atoms can be in exactly the same physical condition until one decays and the other does not. Yet the Sea Battle sort of argument applies here just as well. Consider two predictive statements made before noon, one saying that some particular uranium atom will decay at noon and the other denying that the atom will decay at noon. The rest of the Sea Battle argument transfers over to the example. We

get the fatalistic conclusion that the state of the atom at noon, whether decayed or not, has to be.

The General Fatalistic Conclusion is only about the future. Full-blown metaphysical fatalism is about everything, past, present, and future. This is not an obstacle to fatalism, though. The Sea Battle argument reaching the General Fatalistic Conclusion about the future does all of the hard work. The past and present are easy for the fatalist to deal

with. It is quite plausible that the past is just as the fatalist says it is—the whole past is fixed and settled. The same goes for the present. If anything is in some condition at present, then the thing's current condition is fixed and settled. The present is too late to do anything about the present!

Thus, past and present look ripe for fatalism. If the Sea Battle argument shows that the future is fixed and settled too, then the way seems clear for a final

comprehensive fatalist conclusion: there are no open possibilities at all at any time.

## Objections

Arguments rely on their assumptions. If an argument has a premise that is obviously untrue, then the argument is definitely a failure. Arguments that are taken seriously in metaphysics are seldom that bad. If one strikes us that way, we should strongly suspect that we have not understood it.

Arguments can fail less conclusively, though. Another thing that keeps an argument from proving its conclusion is the existence of an unresolved doubt about a premise. Raising doubts about premises is how the Sea Battle argument is most often faulted. Let's see how well the premises stand scrutiny.

Some philosophers have objected to the Sea Battle argument's First Assumption, the premise saying that one of the two predictions about the battle

is true in advance. This assumption is one version of a principle known as the Law of the Excluded Middle (LEM). Our version excludes any middle ground between the truth of a statement and the truth of its denial.

LEM. Concerning any statement, either it is true or its denial is true.

At least at first, LEM appears irresistible. How could a statement be untrue while the statement denying that it was true—its denial—was untrue too? That would seem to require an

unfathomable ‘reality gap’—an intermediate condition between being and not being. And this could not be like a ghostly haze, since even being a ghostly haze is a way of being! Yet some philosophers have opposed the Sea Battle argument by arguing against LEM. They have contended that LEM applies only to statements that assert settled facts, such as statements about what has already happened. The critics say that other statements, like ones about

a potential sea battle that may or may not take place, have no truth yet. The prediction that the battle will occur is not now true, and neither is its denial, because nothing that exists right now makes either one true. Both predictions are presently indeterminate rather than true. The critics conclude that LEM is false. This criticism has a serious drawback. Suppose that Alice predicted yesterday, 'There will be a thunderstorm in Cleveland tomorrow', and in fact

there is a thunderstorm in Cleveland today. It is only natural to think that Alice got it right yesterday. This means that what Alice said was already true when she said it. Maybe at the time no one knew whether or not it was true. Maybe at the time its truth was unsettled. Still, when we do find out about the storm today, we say that her prediction was correct. If so, then the prediction was not indeterminate yesterday after all. This seems to apply to predictive

statements quite generally. If the future bears them out, then we regard what they say of the future as having been true when they were still predictions. The objection to the LEM denies that they were true in advance. So the objection is in trouble.

An opponent of LEM might be unimpressed. An opponent might first repeat the point that when a predicted event is not now a settled fact, there is nothing around now to make the prediction true. The

opponent could then add that any statement is true only if something makes it true. Conceding that people regard these predictions as having been true when made, the opponent might insist that this need for a truth-maker shows that the predictions couldn't have been true in advance. This restores the conclusion that LEM is wrong about them.

Though this criticism is reasonable, there is a good reply. The reply is that, because predictions are about the future, what

makes them true or untrue is in the future, not in the present. There does not have to be anything around now to make them true. In fact, now is too early. So long as things turn out in the future as predicted, then the predictions are made true now by those later developments. The truth-makers for accurate predictions are in the future, right where they belong.

LEM is looking difficult to refute. Other critics of the Sea Battle argument focus

on its Second Assumption: if any statement is true, then it has to be true. The classic objection to this assumption begins by observing that the assumption has more than one meaning. The critics say that on the interpretation of its meaning where the assumption is correct, it does not help the argument. On the interpretation where it helps, it is not correct. Specifically, the assumption is correct if it means this.

SA1: It has to be that if a

statement is true, then the statement is true.

SA1 is impeccable. What it says must be the case is only that if a statement is true, then it is true. That is truly trivial. SA1 does not tell us that any statement has to be true if it's true. Compare: If a wall is red, then it's red. That is a necessary fact. It applies to all walls, including a formerly brown wall that was just painted red. Yet it surely does not tell us that the wall has to be red. Of course the wall doesn't

have to be red—it was recently brown!

Likewise, the conditional claim—a statement is true if it's true—asserts a necessary fact. But it does not tell us that being true is all it takes for a statement to have to be true. Yet that is precisely what the Sea Battle needs to derive its conclusion—it needs true statements thereby having to be true. Looking back at the reasoning, we see that the argument uses the Second Assumption to draw the initial conclusion that

there are predictions that have to be true. If any assumption brings into the argument this necessity for predictions, it is the Second Assumption, the one that we are now interpreting as SA1. Since SA1 does not bring in any such necessity, the argument's initial conclusion just does not follow logically if the argument uses SA1.

The Sea Battle argument does get what it needs for its initial conclusion to follow logically if the following interpretation of the

Second Assumption is part of the argument.

SA2: If a statement is true, then that statement has to be true.

SA2 does say that being true is enough for a statement to be necessary. So SA2 asserts the necessity of true predictions that the Sea Battle argument needs. But why believe SA2? To all appearances, some truths are contingent, that is, they are actually true but they need not have been true. We think that any lucky guess about something in

the future that is not now settled is actually true, but not necessary. The truth of the guess derives from the occurrence later of what was guessed to happen. Yet SA2 says that even those lucky guesses about the apparently unsettled future would state necessary facts. SA2 says that just being true is enough to make any truth have to be true.

For us to find SA2 credible, we would have to find something about just being true that brings with it necessary truth. Nothing

comes to mind. Being true by itself seems to allow that some things just happen to be true. Something that is true by a fluke is true, it just isn't true by any necessity. The only temptation to think otherwise is a deception. We can be deceived by confusing SA2 with SA1. When we keep our minds clear of that confusion, though, SA2 is not reasonable to believe. Thus, either way we interpret the Second Assumption in the Sea Battle argument, the

argument looks flawed at that point.

## Past Predictions

The Sea Battle argument tries to use present truth to secure future necessity. We have seen that present truths may instead be secured by how the future happens to turn out. But what if something in the past guaranteed a specific future? After all, we are confident that once things are in the past, they are unalterable. So if the past secures the future, then the

future is now necessitated. Metaphysical fatalism has been defended on the basis of the claim that the truth about everything, including the future, already existed in the past. By virtue of existing in the past, this comprehensive truth is a fixed fact. This status of being settled in virtue of being past is sometimes called accidental necessity. The word 'accidental' here signifies that the fixity of the past is not absolutely necessary. There might have been a wholly

different past instead. But once things are in the actual past, they do seem fixed and settled. So this is an ‘accidental’ sort of necessity. We think that the future is not likewise settled, at least not all of it. Choices and chance developments seem open, with some potential to turn out in different ways. The Past Predictions argument seeks to show that the accidental necessity of the past carries over to the whole future.

A bit of philosophical

terminology will be useful. The substance of a statement is what philosophers call a proposition. A proposition is what is said in a statement; it is the thought behind the words. Translations of the statement into another language aim to capture the same proposition in other words. Propositions are what we believe and otherwise think about when truth is at stake. If I predict that many good deeds will be done tomorrow, then the prediction is the

proposition that many good deeds will be done tomorrow. If you hope that many good deeds will be done tomorrow, then this hope of yours has as its content the same proposition as my prediction.

These are propositions, if there really are any such entities. The existence of propositions is controversial among philosophers (as is the existence of everything else!). In any case, with the term ‘proposition’ understood in this way, we

are ready for the Past Predictions argument.

First Assumption: For any way that things will be in the future, there existed in the past a true proposition to the effect that things would be that way.

The first assumption is about propositions that are contents of available predictions. It is not limited to the predictions that anyone has actually made. It says that the contents of all available true predictions existed in the past, whether or not anyone ever stated

the predictions by asserting the propositions. The assumption says that an accurate prediction was always there to be made.

The First Assumption will be critically discussed soon.

Second Assumption: Every aspect of the past is accidentally necessary.

This Second Assumption needs investigating. Clearly, everything we ordinarily regard as being in the past is fixed and settled—the unchangeable status that we are calling accidentally necessary. The Second

Assumption goes beyond that, though, to claim that every last detail of the past of any sort is accidentally necessary. We'll look into that.

If the truth of predictive propositions about everything in the future is accidentally necessary, then that locks in the whole future. So we have arrived at this.

General Fatalistic Conclusion:  
The future in every detail is  
accidentally necessary.

Both assumptions of the Past  
Predictions argument are  
questionable. It is easy to  
have doubts about the  
existence of the countless  
unstated propositions that  
are required by the First  
Assumption. Does  
everything about the future  
correspond to some  
predictive proposition that  
existed in the past?  
Certainly, almost none of  
those predictions is ever  
actually made by anyone.

Why think that the unstated predictive propositions exist?

An adequate investigation of the existence of propositions would take an extensive metaphysical inquiry. Though it would be terrifically interesting, it would be a very long digression here. Fortunately, we need not investigate this in order to appreciate the core of the Past Predictions reasoning. The argument would reach an impressive fatalistic conclusion even if it were

scaled back to actual predictions so as to avoid this issue. People have actually predicted the sorts of things that we think remain open to future resolution.

Some predictions have been made about apparently open choices. People have managed to predict—if only by luck—what someone later chose with all apparent freedom. Some accurate predictions have been made about other apparently open possibilities, such as the

radioactive decay of a particle. The rest of the Past Predictions argument tells us that at least the actually predicted future outcomes have the accidental necessity of the corresponding true predictions. That is a fatalistic enough result to be remarkable. Predicted outcomes of these kinds seem to remain open just as much as ones that aren't predicted by anyone. This scaled-back version of the argument skips the whole question of the existence of

unstated truths. So let's restrict our thinking to actual predictions and proceed.

The Second Assumption of the Past Predictions argument is that every aspect of the past is accidentally necessary. True? When we consider the past, we tend to think of things that are wholly in the past: major historical events, our own previous adventures, and other things that are clearly purely in the past. Those are settled aspects of the

past. Thinking of them makes the Second Assumption seem right. But what is crucial for the argument is whether certain other aspects of the past are in the same boat—the past truth of each true predictive statement.

The predictions have been made. So the past existence of the predictions is settled. A prediction's truth, though, is not something that is entirely accounted for by the past. A prediction is about the future. Because of this, if the prediction is

true, then future circumstances are what make it true. This is just another way to say that things in the future settle the truth of the prediction. So, as long as some future things are currently unsettled, the truth of their past prediction is unsettled as well. It is reasonable for us to believe that some of the future remains open. We have just seen that, if this is so, then the truth of predictions about those aspects of the future remains unsettled too.

Thus, it now looks as though the Past Predictions argument runs into trouble that is fundamentally the same as the problem for the Sea Battle argument. The problem arises here as the dubious assumption that every aspect of the past, even the truth of a prediction about the future, is accidentally necessary merely because it is in the past.

## **Necessary Conditions**

I cannot finish off a mile-long run right now. Why?

Because I need to have run almost a mile just before now, so that I can now complete the running of a mile. Yet I have not been running. So I cannot finish a mile run at this point.

This explanation seems to say that there is a certain necessary condition for my finishing a mile run—my having run almost a mile—and the absence of this condition renders me unable to complete a mile run. The first assumption of our next fatalistic argument says that, quite generally,

the absence of a necessary condition for an alternative always closes off the possibility of that alternative.

First Assumption: Something is fixed and unalterable if any necessary condition for not having the thing is absent. (Restated in more positive terms: If something has an open alternative, then all that is needed for the alternative to exist is present.)

This First Assumption merits careful consideration. We'll investigate it after seeing

the rest of the reasoning. The other assumption in the Necessary Conditions argument is rationally irresistible. It just says that any condition is needed in order to have that very condition.

**Second Assumption:** Any condition is a necessary condition for itself.

To appreciate how these two assumptions work together to rule out any open alternatives, let's think about an example. Suppose that Cathy is about to make a choice between accepting

a job offer and not accepting it. Suppose that Cathy will choose to accept the offer. Could her not choosing to accept be an open alternative at this point, before she chooses? Well, what conditions would have to hold, in order for Cathy not to choose to accept? For Cathy to avoid the choice to accept, at a minimum she would have not to choose to accept. In other words, a necessary condition for Cathy not choosing to accept is that very condition

itself: that Cathy will not choose to accept the offer. As the Second Assumption says, that condition is a non-negotiable necessary condition for itself. Again, it is part of our example that Cathy will choose to accept. So a necessary condition of this not happening is absent, now and forever. The First Assumption of the argument says that when any necessary condition for something not happening is absent, the thing is fixed and unalterable. So it follows from the two

assumptions that Cathy's actual choice is already fixed and unalterable before she makes it.

The same reasoning applies equally well to any apparently open possibility, whether or not choice is involved. Concerning any actual thing at any time, some necessary condition for not having that thing is absent—if nothing else, the missing necessary condition is the very condition of not having the thing at the time. So the argument arrives at the following

conclusion.

Fully Fatalistic Conclusion: All actual entities, events, and circumstances, past, present, and future, are fixed and unalterable down to the last detail.

To begin a critical examination of the Necessary Conditions argument, let's rethink the explanation presented earlier of why we regard past facts as fixed and unalterable. We observed that my finishing a mile run is not an open possibility at times like now when I

haven't been running. We also observed that my having run almost a mile is a necessary condition for my finishing a mile, and that condition is absent. But is the absence of a necessary condition really the explanation of why I cannot now finish a mile run? Here is a rival explanation. To finish a mile run now, I'd have to cause different things to have happened prior to now. I'd have somehow to cause it to be the case that I have been running. But as a matter of

fact, I cannot do anything now that would cause me to have been running, nor can anything else now cause me to have been running.<sup>3</sup> This incapacity to supply the needed condition is why I can't finish a mile run now.

Once this account is offered, it seems a better explanation. Generally, we regard the events of the past as not subject to any current causal influence. Our confidence in the fixity of the past derives from that.

Even if this is a better account of why we think that past facts are unalterable, so far this is no objection to the core of the Necessary Conditions argument. It is no reason to deny the claim of the First Assumption that something is unalterable when a necessary condition of an alteration is absent. But once we don't need that claim to understand the fixity of the past, we can see that the claim is doubtful on its own. Let's revisit Cathy's choice. We must concede that,

whichever choice Cathy makes, some necessary condition of the alternative is absent. Does that absence, all by itself, make her stuck with her actual choice? It seems not. She need not be stuck with it, if the missing condition is available to her. If she is able to supply all missing necessary conditions, then no necessary condition stands in her way.

We have no reason to doubt that Cathy is able to supply the needed conditions. The necessary condition

discussed, that of her not choosing to accept the offer, seems available as she considers the choice. Maybe there is some hidden reason why it is not really available. But the reason is not just that her non-acceptance is a necessary condition, and it is absent. Analogously, the mere absence of, say, a person, doesn't imply that the person is unavailable. The person may be ready and waiting to be present. Likewise, we have no good reason to think that the

mere absence of a necessary condition for something locks in its unavailability. This undercuts the reasonableness of the First Assumption of the Necessary Conditions argument.

So the argument is in trouble. The mere absence of a necessary condition does not seem to guarantee its unavailability. The First Assumption might be defended on another basis. It could be contended that absent necessary conditions

never actually are available. This would be enough. We would be just as stuck with the actual situation if the necessary conditions for something else were never in fact available. Are they ever available?

Consider this challenge: If there are available alternatives that make for open possibilities, then how come no allegedly open possibility has ever been realized? Never once has something true at a time turned into something that was untrue at that very

time. No truth was ever actually avoided. So why think that the makings for such a thing are actually available?

In confronting these questions, we should think carefully about what we are denying if we deny that all is fixed and settled. If we say that an actual future truth is not fixed and settled, then we are not saying or implying that something true at a time can be made untrue too. We are saying, concerning something true in the

future, that it has some potential to be untrue instead. We are thinking that some truths have an unrealized potential to be just untrue, never true. To defend this thought, we need not directly answer the questions just raised. We need not look for something that has the status of being true at a time and show how it could become also untrue or it could change into being untrue at the time. Yet the challenge posed by the questions asks us for an

example of something true at a time that realizes the potential to be untrue at the time. So we need not meet this challenge.

How might we defend our belief in the existence of the potential, if not with the sort of examples that the challenge asks for? We could start by arguing that some future events—maybe choices, maybe physically undetermined events—are not necessitated in any known way. This would include arguing that the fatalists'

efforts to prove otherwise fail. Also, we might find evidence that certain pairs of scenarios are duplicates of one another in every way that seems relevant. Yet in one member of the pair, one of our candidates for being an open possibility occurs; in the other member of the pair, the other alternative occurs. If we find such pairs, then in each case the paired duplicate argues that nothing made the one possibility occur rather than the other—it just chanced

to happen that way. For instance, two flips of a coin, controlled in every known way to be exact duplicate flips in exact duplicate conditions, might be found to result in the coin landing on different sides. Wouldn't it be most reasonable to say that each flip had a chance to end up the other way? Finally, we might have a well-confirmed scientific theory that implies that some outcomes remain undetermined until they occur. These are reasons that we can have to think

that there are open possibilities.

## God Knows

Maybe an all-knowing God exists.<sup>4</sup> If so, does that make fatalism true too? Metaphysical fatalism might seem to follow readily from the existence of God, using the following argument.

First Assumption: If God knows everything, then God knows in advance all truths about the whole future.

That seems safe, though we shall see that some have objected to it.

Second Assumption: If God knows any given truth about the future, then any potential for that truth to be untrue would be a potential for God to be mistaken about it.

To see what the Second Assumption says, suppose that God knows that a particular flipped coin will land heads up. According to the Second Assumption, any potential for the coin not to land heads up would be a potential for God to have the mistaken belief that it will land heads up.

The heads-up outcome is what God thinks and knows in advance. So if the future turned out the other way, the Second Assumption implies that God would still have this same belief and it would be untrue. We'll soon think more about that assumption.

Final Assumption: It is impossible for God to be mistaken about anything.

We can take it for granted that the Final Assumption is correct. We can assume that this is the sort of God we are considering—a God

who is never mistaken under any possible conditions.

Conditionally Fatalistic Conclusion: If God knows everything, then the whole future is fixed and unalterable.

This conclusion does not assert any fatalism. Deriving fatalism about the future would require the added assumption that an all-knowing God does exist. Still, it is interesting to consider whether or not the existence of an all-knowing God implies that the whole

future is fixed. We are now investigating that.

One line of opposition to the God Knows argument holds that, contrary to the First Assumption, God knows everything without knowing anything in advance. The opponent claims that God is outside of the time in which we exist—that is, the sequential time of before and after, the time of past, present, and future. God exists ‘in eternity’. Eternity is not in sequential time. Eternity is not before, during, or after anything. So

God does not know anything ‘in advance’, since this requires existing in time before something happens and knowing that it will happen. God exists in eternity instead. The objection concludes that this allows God to know everything without having any advance knowledge.

Existence outside of past, present, and future is difficult to understand. Whatever such existence amounts to, though, it does not seem to ruin the core of the God Knows argument.

The argument essentially relies on God having exhaustive knowledge, not advance knowledge. To see this, we can replace ‘in advance’ in the argument with ‘in eternity’. To the extent that we can understand the resulting reasoning, it seems to have the same merits as the original. Suppose that God knows in eternity what is in our future—the future relative to us now. If so, then any potential for our future to be otherwise is a potential for something

God knows to be untrue. The God Knows argument tries to persuade us that potential of that sort implies an impossible mistake by God. If the argument succeeds, then we could not avoid the conclusion by locating God in eternity. So this is not a promising source of doubt about the reasoning.

What about the Second Assumption of the God Knows argument? It says that if there is some potential for a true predictive statement not to

be true, even though God knows it to be true (in advance or in eternity), then that is a potential for God to make a mistake. This claim is doubtful. Why would God be stuck believing something, whether or not it was true? God's knowledge could be more flexible.

For instance, maybe God knows all by 'seeing' all. Thus, God knows how things will be in our future by perfectly perceiving how things are at later times. Perception of a fact always

derives from that fact. So God's perceptual knowledge of future facts derives from the facts perceived. If God knows by perception how our future will be, then God derives from our future the complete information that God has about it.

If this is how God's knowledge of our future works, then a potential for things to be otherwise in our future would be accompanied by a potential for God to have perceived otherwise. The future facts

would have been different and God would have perceived them to be facts. Had things been otherwise, God would have derived different future information (in advance or in eternity). God would have known the alternative truths instead of having any mistaken beliefs. This casts doubt on the Second Assumption of the God Knows argument. It shows us that one sort of knowledge by God of the future, combined with the existence of some potential for an alternative future

truth, does not imply the possibility of God making a mistake. The combination only implies a potential for something that is actually known by God to have been untrue—and perhaps known by God to have been untrue. It does not imply a potential for anything untrue to have been mistakenly believed by God.

## **A Final Note**

None of the arguments for metaphysical fatalism has turned out to seem successful. Nonetheless, a

popular fatalistic saying remains appealing: ‘What will be, will be.’ There is no denying that this states a fact. Did we overlook the wisdom of this saying in our search for support for fatalism?

Actually, there is no metaphysical fatalism in the saying. It does not say that anything has to be. People do sometimes use these words to express an attitude of resignation toward whatever the future holds. But any good basis for that attitude is

something beyond the sheer content of the saying. The fact that it states does not warrant any attitude, fatalistic resignation or otherwise. It claims nothing one way or the other about whether we control the future or whether the future is already settled. It simply says: however things will be, that is how they will be—however they get to be that way. This is not fatalism.

People sometimes take the saying to assert that whatever is destined to be,

will be. That is not what it literally says, since it does not mention destiny. But people do take it that way. It sounds more fatalistic on this interpretation. It really isn't, though. It does not say how much of the future is destined, if any. Everyone, including those who deny all destiny, can agree that 'whatever' is destined, will be. Those who deny all destiny can consistently add that this is an empty truth, because nothing is destined.

'What will be, will be' is a

good thing to say, for all that. It often comforts people. It just doesn't give us any reason to accept metaphysical fatalism.

## **FURTHER READING**

This chapter opposes arguments for metaphysical fatalism. The following are a couple of works by defenders of fatalistic arguments. They include arguments that we have discussed. Several editions of a book by Richard Taylor are listed, because his defense of fatalism changes

notably in succeeding editions of his book.

Steven M. Cahn , Fate, Logic and Time (Ridgeview, 1967).

Richard Taylor , ‘Fate’, in Metaphysics (Prentice-Hall, 1963, 1974, 1983, 1992).

An issue with close connections to fatalism is the compatibility of God's knowledge of our future with our having freedom. Here is a collection of essays about that.

John Martin Fisher (ed.), God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom (Stanford, 1989).

1 For more about

determinism, see ‘Free Will and Determinism’, Chapter 6.

- 2 ‘Free Will and Determinism’, Chapter 6, is about this.
- 3 Our chapter about time defends the possibility of backward causation. The topic there is whether there could have been a reality where causes run backward in time. Even if such an alternative reality is possible, this does not tell us that any such causes are actually available.
- 4 We investigate this in our

‘God’ chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: Free Will and Determinism

Theodore Sider

### The Problem

Suppose you are kidnaped and forced to commit a series of terrible murders. The kidnaper makes you shoot a first victim by forcing your finger to squeeze the trigger of a gun, hypnotizes you into poisoning a second, and then throws you from an airplane, causing you to

squash a third. Miraculously, you survive the fall from the airplane. You stagger from the scene, relieved that the ordeal is over. But then, to your amazement, you are apprehended by the police, who handcuff you and charge you with murder. The parents of the victims scream obscenities at you as you are led away in disgrace.

Are the police and parents fair to blame you for the killings? Obviously not, for you have an unassailable

excuse: you did not act of your own free will. You couldn't help what you did; you could not have done otherwise. And only those who act freely are morally responsible.

We all believe that we have free will. How could we not? Renouncing freedom would mean no longer planning for the future, for why make plans if you are not free to change what will happen? It would mean renouncing morality, for only those who act freely deserve blame or

punishment. Without freedom, we march along pre-determined paths, unable to control our destinies. Such a life is not worth living.

Yet freedom seems to conflict with a certain apparent fact. Incredibly, this fact is no secret; most people are fully aware of it. We uncritically accept free will only because we fail to put two and two together. The problem of free will is a time bomb hidden within our most deeply held beliefs.

Here is the fact: every event has a cause. This fact is known as determinism.

We all believe in causes. If scientists discovered debris in the upper stratosphere spelling out ‘Ozzy Osbourne!’, they would immediately go to work to discover the cause. Was the debris put there by a renegade division of NASA comprised of heavy-metal fans? Was it a science project from a school for adolescent geniuses? If these things were ruled out as causes, the scientists

would start to consider stranger hypotheses. Perhaps aliens from another planet are playing a joke on us. Perhaps the debris is left over from a collision between comets, and the resemblance to the name of the heavy-metal singer is purely coincidental. Perhaps different bits of the debris each have different kinds of causes. Any of these hypotheses might be entertained. But the one thing the scientists would not contemplate is that

there simply is no cause whatsoever. Causes can be hard to discover, or coincidental, or have many different parts, but they are always there.

It's not that uncaused events are utterly inconceivable. We can imagine what it would be like for an uncaused event to occur. For that matter, we can imagine what it would be like for all sorts of strange things to occur: pigs flying, monkeys making 10,000 feet tall statues from jello, and so on. But it is

reasonable to believe that no such things in fact occur. Likewise, it is reasonable to believe that there are in fact no uncaused events—that is, it is reasonable to believe in determinism.

Our belief in determinism is reasonable because we have all seen science succeed, again and again, in its search for the underlying causes of things. Technological innovations owe their existence to science: skyscrapers, vaccination, rocket ships, the internet. Science seems

to explain everything we observe: the changing of the seasons, the movement of the planets, the inner workings of plants and animals. Given this track record, we reasonably expect the march of scientific progress to continue; we expect that science will eventually discover the causes of everything.

The threat to freedom comes when we realize that this march will eventually overtake us. From the scientific point of view,

human choices and behavior are just another part of the natural world. Like the seasons, planets, plants, and animals, our actions are studyable, predictable, explainable, controllable. It is hard to say when, if ever, scientists will learn enough about what makes humans tick in order to predict everything we do. But regardless of when the causes of human behavior are discovered, determinism assures us that these causes exist.

It is hard to accept that one's

own choices are subject to causes. Suppose you become sleepy and are tempted to put down this book. The causes are trying to put you to sleep. But you resist them! You are strong and continue reading anyway. Have you thwarted the causes and refuted determinism? Of course not. Continuing to read has its own cause. Perhaps your love of metaphysics overcomes your drowsiness. Perhaps your parents taught you to be disciplined. Or perhaps you

are just stubborn. No matter what the reason, there was some cause.

You may reply: 'But I felt no compulsion to read or not to read; I simply decided to do one or the other. I sensed no cause.' It is true that many thoughts, feelings, and decisions do not feel caused. But this does not really threaten determinism. Some times the causes of our decisions aren't consciously detectable, but those causes still exist. Some causes of behavior are

preconscious functions of the brain, as contemporary psychology teaches, or perhaps even subconscious desires, as Freud thought. Other causes of decisions may not even be mental. The brain is an incredibly complicated physical object, and might 'swerve' this way or that as a result of certain motions of its tiniest parts. Such purely physical causes cannot be detected merely by directing one's attention inward, no matter how long and hard and calmly one meditates. We can't expect

to be able to detect all the causes of our decisions just by introspection.

So: determinism is true, even for human actions. But now, consider any allegedly free action. To illustrate how much is at stake here, let's consider an action that is horribly reprehensible: Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939. We most certainly blame Hitler for this action. We thus consider him to have acted freely. But determinism seems to imply that Hitler was not

free at all.

To see why, we must first investigate the concepts of cause and effect. A cause is an earlier event that makes a later effect happen. Given the laws of nature,<sup>1</sup> once the cause has occurred, the effect must occur. Lightning causes thunder: the laws of nature governing electricity and sound guarantee that, when lightning strikes, thunder will follow.

Determinism says that Hitler's invasion of Poland was caused by some earlier event. So far, there is little

to threaten Hitler's freedom. The cause of the invasion might be something under Hitler's control, in which case the invasion would also be under his control. For instance, the cause might be a decision that Hitler made just before the invasion. If so, then it seems we can still blame Hitler for ordering the invasion.

But now consider this decision itself. It is just another event. So determinism implies that it too must have a cause. This

new cause might be an even earlier decision Hitler made, or something his advisers told him, or something he ate, or, more likely, a combination of many factors. Whatever it is, call this cause of Hitler's decision to invade Poland 'c'. Notice that c also caused the invasion of Poland. For as we saw above, a cause is an earlier event that makes a later event happen. Once c occurred, Hitler's decision had to occur; and once that decision occurred, the

invasion had to occur.

We can repeat this reasoning indefinitely. Determinism implies that  $c$  must have an earlier cause  $c_1$ , which in turn must have an earlier cause  $c_2$ , and so on. The resulting sequence of events stretches back in time:

...  $c_2 \rightarrow c_1 \rightarrow c \rightarrow$  the decision  
→ the invasion

Each event in the sequence causes the invasion, since each event causes the event that occurs immediately after it, which then causes the next event occurring

immediately after that one, and so on. The final few events in this sequence look like ones under Hitler's control. But the earlier ones do not, for as we move back in time, we eventually reach events before Hitler's birth.

This argument can be repeated for any human action, however momentous or trivial. Suppose an old man slips while crossing the street, and I laugh at him instead of helping him up. Using the above chain of reasoning, we can show that my

laughter was caused by events before my birth.

Things now look very bad for freedom. Hitler no longer seems to have had a free choice about whether to invade Poland. I seem to have had no choice but to laugh at the old man. For these actions were all caused by things outside our control. But then what was morally wrong about what Hitler or I did? How can we blame Hitler for invading Poland if it was settled before his birth that he would do it? How can we

blame me for laughing?  
How can we blame anyone  
for anything?

We can restate the challenge to freedom in terms of physics. Any action or decision involves the motion of sub-atomic particles in one's body and brain. These sub-atomic particles move according to the laws of physics. Physics lets us calculate the future positions of particles from information about (i) the previous states of the particles, and (ii) the forces acting on the particles. So,

in principle, one could have examined the sub-atomic particles one hundred years before the invasion of Poland, calculated exactly how those particles would be moving one hundred years later, and thereby calculated that Hitler would invade Poland. Such calculations are far too difficult to ever complete in practice, but that doesn't matter. Whether or not anyone could have completed the calculations, the particles were there, before Hitler's birth, and

the fact that they were there, and arranged in the way that they were, made it inevitable that Hitler would invade Poland. Once again, we have found a cause for Hitler's invasion that already existed before Hitler was born. And the existence of such a cause seems to imply that Hitler's invasion of Poland was not a free action.

And yet, it must have been free, for how else can we blame him for this despicable act? The time bomb has exploded. Two of

our most deeply held beliefs, our belief in science and our belief in freedom and morality, seem to contradict each other. We must resolve this conflict.

## **Hard Determinism**

The simplest strategy for resolution is to reject one of the beliefs that produce the conflict. One could reject free will, or one could reject determinism.

The rejection of free will in the face of determinism is called hard determinism. Think of the hard

determinist as a hard-nosed intellectual who tolerates no softies. Free will conflicts with science, so free will has got to go. Here is a typical hard determinist speech:

We must get used to the idea that no one is really responsible for anything. Belief in freedom and moral responsibility was a luxury of a pre-scientific age. Now that we have grown up, we must put aside childish ways and face the facts. Science has disproved the existence of freedom and

morality.

Can we live with this depressing philosophy? Philosophers must seek the truth, however difficult it may be to accept. Maybe hard determinism is one of those difficult truths. Hard determinists might attempt 'damage control', arguing that life without freedom is not as bad as one might think. Society might still punish criminals, for instance. Hard determinists must deny that criminals deserve punishment, since the crimes were not

committed freely. But they can say that there is still a use for punishment: punishing criminals keeps them off the streets and discourages future crimes. Still, accepting hard determinism is nearly unthinkable. Nor is it clear that one could stop believing in free will, even if one wanted to. If you find someone who claims to believe hard determinism, here's a little experiment to try. Punch him in the face, really hard. Then try to convince him not to blame

you. After all, according to him, you had no choice but to punch him! I predict you will find it very difficult to convince him to practice what he preaches.

Hard determinism is a position of last resort. Let's see what the other options look like.

## Libertarianism

If the hard determinist is the intellectually hard-nosed devotee of science, the libertarian2 has the opposite mindset. Libertarians resolve the

conflict between free will and determinism by rejecting determinism. Their guiding thought is that people are special. The march of science, subjugating phenomena to exceptionless law, is limited to the non-human realm. For libertarians, science is good as far as it goes, but it will never succeed in completely predicting human behavior. Humans, and humans alone, transcend the laws of nature: they are free.

What makes people so special? Some libertarians answer that we have souls, non-physical sources of consciousness, which make choices that are not controlled by laws of nature. Others say that humans are indeed purely physical systems, but that they are not subject to the natural laws that govern other physical systems. Either way, laws of nature do not wholly determine human behavior.

Although libertarians are clear on what freedom

isn't—namely, determinism—they have a little more trouble telling us what freedom is. They do not want to say that freedom is merely uncaused action. Saying that would equate freedom with randomness, and libertarians don't want to do that. Here's why.

Suppose Mother Teresa discovers a hand-grenade in an orphanage in Calcutta. As you might expect, she picks up the hand-grenade in order to dispose of it safely. But now an utterly

uncaused event occurs: to her horror, her hand suddenly pulls out the pin and throws the grenade into the heart of the orphanage. The grenade explodes, resulting in mayhem and destruction. When I say 'uncaused', I really mean that there is no cause, none whatsoever. As I am imagining the example, the action of pulling the pin and throwing the grenade was not caused by any decision on Mother Teresa's part; nor did it have an external physical cause. No

dormant dark side of Mother Teresa's personality has finally come to light. She has no nervous tic. Her hand simply flew up from absolutely no cause whatsoever. This clearly is not a free action. We could not blame Mother Teresa; she is the victim of a cruel accident.

The alarming thing for libertarians is that Mother Teresa seems unfree precisely because her action was uncaused. Freedom now appears to require causation. This obviously

threatens the fundamental libertarian claim that the key to the problem of freedom is indeterminism of human action. Libertarians must somehow distinguish between free undetermined action and randomness.

Some libertarians address this problem by postulating a special kind of causation that only humans wield, called agent causation. Ordinary mechanistic causation, the kind studied in physics and the other hard sciences, obeys laws.

Mechanistic causes are repeatable and predictable: if you repeat the same cause again and again, the very same effect is guaranteed to occur each time. Agent causation, on the other hand, does not obey laws. There is no saying which way a free human being will exercise her agent causation. The very same person in exactly similar circumstances might agent-cause different things. According to the theory of agent causation, you act freely when (i) your

action is not caused in the ordinary, mechanistic way, but (ii) your action is caused by you—by agent causation. If you freely decide to eat Wheaties one morning rather than your usual helping of Apple Jacks, it would have been impossible to predict beforehand which cereal you would choose. Nevertheless, your choice was not a random occurrence, for you yourself caused it. You caused it by agent causation.

It is unclear whether agent

causation really solves the problem of randomness. Consider what an agent-causation theorist would say about your freely making a difficult decision. There are two important factors in decision-making: what you desire, and what you believe is the best means to achieve that desire. If you are undecided whether to vote Democrat or Republican in a US presidential election, for instance, this is because some of your beliefs and desires favor a Democratic

vote, and others favor a Republican vote. Suppose that, in the end, the set favoring a Democratic vote wins out. A libertarian would say that mechanistic causes that occurred in the past did not determine this outcome. It was you yourself, via agent causation, that selected the Democratic vote. Your selection was subject to no laws; it was unpredictable. This activity of agent causation was not caused by your beliefs and desires. But now—and here is the

problem—since the selection was not causally based in your beliefs and desires, it seems entirely detached from you. The selection did not emerge from what you know about the candidates and what sort of leader you want for your country. Your vote didn't arise from who you are. It just appeared in the world, as if by magic. Given this, it would be odd to praise or blame you for it. And this suggests that it was unfree.

Whether or not libertarianism

relies on agent causation, its most worrisome feature is its clash with science. First, libertarians must reject the possibility of an all-encompassing psychology.

Human

behavior would be governed by the laws of such a science, and libertarians deny that human behavior is controlled by any laws. But the clash does not end there. Libertarians must also reject the possibility of an all-encompassing physics. The realms of

psychology and physics cannot be neatly separated, for human bodies are physical objects, made up of subatomic particles. An all-encompassing physics could predict the future motions of all particles—even those in human bodies—based on the earlier states of particles. Since libertarians say that human behavior cannot be scientifically predicted, they must deny the possibility of such a physics. According to libertarians, if physicists turned their measuring

instruments on the subatomic particles composing a free person, formerly observed patterns would break down.

This attitude toward science seems rash. Here in the twenty-first century, we have the benefit of hindsight on various disagreements between science, on the one hand, and religion and philosophy, on the other. Remember the Catholic Church's decision to censor Copernicus and Galileo for saying that the Earth moves

around the Sun. No one wants to repeat that mistake. And remember the dramatic successes of science, both theoretical and technological. Of course, science is not infallible. But a philosopher had better have very good reasons to declare that an existing science is just plain wrong, or that a certain kind of scientific progress will never happen. One's philosophy should avoid colliding with or limiting science.

Our choices look grim. On the

one hand, there is the dismal philosophy of hard determinism, which robs life of all that is distinctly human and worthwhile. On the other hand, there is the radically anti-scientific philosophy of libertarianism—which, given the problem of randomness, may not even succeed in salvaging free will.

# Interlude: Quantum Mechanics

Before moving on, we should investigate a side issue:

whether quantum mechanics bears on the problem of freedom. Quantum mechanics is a theory about the behavior of tiny particles. This theory was developed in the early part of the twentieth century and continues to be accepted by physicists today. Quantum mechanics (or at least, a certain version of it) is a radically indeterministic theory. It does not predict with certainty what will occur; it only gives probabilities of outcomes. No matter how

much information you have about a particle, you cannot predict with certainty where it will be later. All you can say is how likely it is that the particle will be found in various locations. And this is not a mere limitation on human knowledge. The particle's future position is simply not determined by the past, regardless of how much we know about it. Only the probabilities are determined.

In the previous sections I was ignoring quantum

mechanics. For instance, I assumed that if a cause occurs, its effect must occur, even though quantum mechanics says that causes merely make their effects probable. Why did I ignore quantum mechanics?

Because

randomness is not freedom. Let us try a little thought experiment. First pretend that quantum mechanics is incorrect and physics is truly deterministic. The threat to human freedom that this presents is what we have been talking about

so far in this chapter. Next, in each person's brain, add a little lottery, which every so often randomly causes the person to swerve one way rather than another. This is like what quantum mechanics says really happens: there is an element of randomness to what events occur. Does the threat to freedom go away? Clearly not. If the original, wholly determined person had no free will, then the new, randomized person has no free will either; the lottery injects

only randomness, not freedom or responsibility. And as we learned from the case of Mother Teresa, randomness does not mean freedom. If anything, randomness undermines freedom.

A libertarian might concede that quantum randomness is not sufficient for freedom, but nevertheless claim that quantum randomness makes room for freedom, because it makes room for agent causation. Imagine that it is 1939, and Hitler has not yet

decided to invade Poland. He is trying to decide what to do among the following three options:

Invade Poland

Invade France

Stop being such an evil guy  
and become a ballet dancer

Quantum mechanics assigns probabilities to each of these possible decisions; it does not say which one Hitler will choose. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the probabilities are as follows:

95.0% Invade Poland

4.9% Invade France

0.1% Become a ballet dancer

After assigning these probabilities, the work of quantum mechanics is complete. According to some libertarians, agent causation now steps in. After quantum mechanics sets the probabilities, Hitler himself chooses, by agent causation, which decision he will in fact make. Physics sets probabilities, but people, by agent causation, ultimately decide what occurs.

If this picture were correct, then my criticism of

libertarianism as being anti-scientific would be rebutted: agent causation could peacefully coexist with quantum mechanics. In fact, though, the coexistence picture makes agent causation a slave to quantum-mechanical probabilities.

Imagine running the following interesting (if wildly unethical) experiment. First produce one million exact clones of Hitler as he was in 1939. Then, in one million separate laboratories, reproduce the exact

conditions that Hitler faced before he decided to invade Poland. Put each clone in his own laboratory and deceive him into thinking that it is really 1939 and that he is in charge of Germany. Then sit back and watch. Record how many clones attempt to invade Poland, how many attempt to invade France, and how many attempt to become ballet dancers. The coexistence picture says that you will observe a distribution of behaviors that roughly matches the

probabilities listed above, for the coexistence picture says that quantum mechanics correctly gives the probabilities of outcomes. Thus, you will observe around 950,000 clones trying to invade Poland, around 49,000 trying to invade France, and around 1,000 practicing ballet. If you repeat the procedure again and again, you will continue to observe outcomes in approximately the same ratios. (The more times you repeat the experiment, the closer the

total ratios will match the probabilities, just as the more times one flips a coin, the closer the ratio of heads to tails approaches one-to-one.) If you change the laboratory conditions faced by the clones, so that quantum mechanics predicts different probabilities, you will observe a new distribution of behaviors that fits the new probabilities. The distribution keeps following what quantum mechanics says.

What good then is agent

causation? It seems to mindlessly follow the probabilities, having no effect of its own on the distribution of outcomes. This sort of agent causation is empty; it adds nothing to freedom or responsibility. Agent causation, if it is to be worth anything, must be capable of disrupting the probabilities given by quantum mechanics. There can be no peaceful coexistence: agent causation theorists must clash with science. Quantum mechanics does

not help the agent-causation theorist. So I will go back to ignoring quantum mechanics.

We are back to the grim dilemma. Apparently, we must reject science or reject freedom. Yet neither option seems at all appealing.

## Compatibilism

Many philosophers believe that there is a way out of this dilemma. Others think that this way out is a big mistake. You must decide for yourself.

The way out is called

compatibilism. According to compatibilists, our discussion took a wrong turn all the way back when we said that the available options were rejecting freedom or rejecting determinism. Compatibilists say that this overlooks a third option. We can have our cake and eat it too: we can retain both freedom and determinism. That way we can preserve both our science and our humanity. The argument in the first section, which concluded that freedom and

determinism are opposed to each other, was a mistake. Free will is in fact compatible with determinism. The alleged conflict is an illusion, based on a misunderstanding of the concept of free will. Our actions (or at least their probabilities) are indeed caused by events before our births. But they are often free despite this.

To explain what compatibilists are up to, let's first consider some examples. Imagine a very young boy with a serious

misunderstanding of the concept of a man. This boy thinks it is part of the definition of the word 'man' that men never cry. As far as he knows, the men in his family never cry, the men on television never cry, and so on. He believes that his father is a man, of course, but one day he sees his father crying. The boy becomes very confused. Two of his beliefs now conflict: his belief that his father is a man and his belief that his father is crying. Which should he

give up? Should he decide that his father is not a man after all? Or should he decide that his father was not really crying—that he was only cutting up onions, say? Obviously, he should do neither. Instead, he should clear up his conceptual confusion about the nature of manhood. Then he will see that his beliefs about his father's manhood and about his father's crying are compatible after all.

Here is a second example. How would you define the

word ‘contact’, as in ‘Barry Bonds’ bat made contact with the baseball’? If you are like most people, your first answer is probably something like this: things are in ‘contact’ when there is no empty space between them. But now remember your high-school science. Baseballs and bats are made up of atoms. These atoms consist of nuclei and surrounding clouds of electrons. When one atom approaches another, the electrons of the atoms repel one another with

electromagnetic forces. The closer together the atoms get, the stronger the forces become. Eventually the forces become so strong that they push the atoms away from each other. This occurs when the atoms get very close to each other, but before their clouds of electrons start to overlap. Thus, as Bonds' bat closed in on the baseball, the outermost atoms of the bat began to repel the outermost atoms of the ball, until eventually the ball came to a halt and flew in

the opposite direction. At every moment there was some space between the bat and the ball. In fact, there is never absolutely zero space between bats and balls, nor between fists and jaws, fingers and computer keyboards, or any other things we consider to be in contact. Yet we all believe that contact regularly occurs. So we have another apparent conflict, this time between our belief in high-school science and our belief that things are regularly in

contact. Should we renounce one of these beliefs? Obviously not. We should instead reject the proposed definition of 'contact'. Those who accept that definition are in a sense conceptually confused. For things can be in contact even when there is a small amount of space in between them. (What then is the correct definition of contact? Tough question! What about: things are in contact when there is no visible space in between? This is only a

start.)

The compatibilist makes a similar claim about free will. Determinism seems to conflict with freedom only because we misunderstand the concept of freedom. If 'free' meant 'uncaused', then the conflict would be real. But that's not what 'free' means. (Remember Mother Teresa.) Once we clear up our conceptual confusion, the conflict will vanish. Then we can believe in both free will and determinism. Properly understood, they were

never really opposed.

So far so good. But if 'free' doesn't mean 'uncaused', what does it mean? The compatibilist wants to say, roughly, that a free action is one that is caused in the right way. When you were kidnaped and forced to commit murders, your actions were unfree because they were caused in the wrong way. Free actions, such as Hitler's invasion of Poland, my writing of this chapter, and your reading it, also have causes, but they are caused

in the right way. All actions have causes, but having a cause doesn't settle whether an action is free. Whether it is free is settled by what kind of cause it has. If free actions are those that are caused in the right way, as this definition says, then an action can be both free and caused. Thus, given this definition, freedom and determinism do not conflict.

Hard determinists and libertarians may object that all causes should be treated alike. So long as my choice

is caused by events before my birth, it is unfree; it does not matter how it is caused. But for some purposes, compatibilists can reply, it is clear that causes are not all alike. Causing a running back to fall by tackling him is legal football; causing him to fall by shooting him with a crossbow is not. The rules of football treat some causes differently from others. According to compatibilists, we can think of freedom and morality in an analogous way. Morality, like football, has rules.

These rules treat some causes differently from others. If an action is caused in a certain way—the right way—then the rules of morality count that action as free. But if an action is caused in the wrong way, then the rules count that action as unfree. It is admittedly strange that my actions can be free even though they were caused by events that occurred before I was born. Some philosophers reject compatibilism on this basis. But given the implausibility

of hard determinism and libertarianism, compatibilism at least deserves a fair hearing.

Compatibilists must refine their theory, though. When they say that free actions must be caused 'in the right way', what exactly does that mean? Examples were given: Hitler's invasion was caused in the right way; murders coerced by your kidnaper were caused in the wrong way. But examples are not good enough. We need a definition.

Here is a first stab: a free

action is one that is caused by the person's beliefs and desires. This checks out with some of the examples. When kidnaped, your beliefs and desires did not cause you to shoot the first victim or to fall from the airplane onto the third. You did not want to do these things; your actions were caused by the beliefs and desires of your kidnaper. So the proposed definition correctly counts your behavior in those cases as not being free. It also correctly counts Hitler's

invasion as being free, since the invasion was caused by Hitler's sinister beliefs and desires. Likewise, since my beliefs and desires caused me to write this chapter, and yours caused you to read it, these actions are also free, according to this definition.

But the definition's success does not last. Recall the second victim, whom you poisoned while you were hypnotized. If your kidnaper hypnotized you into wanting to poison the victim, then the poisoning

was caused by your beliefs and desires. So the definition says that you were free. Yet you obviously were not free. So the definition is wrong. The compatibilist needs a better definition.

When you were hypnotized, you acquired beliefs and desires against your will. So maybe we should change the definition to say: a free action is one that is caused by the person's beliefs and desires, provided that the person has freely chosen those beliefs and desires.

But this definition is circular: the word ‘free’ is used in its own definition. If circular definitions were kosher, we could have used a much simpler one: a free action is one that is free. But this is clearly unhelpful. Circular definitions are unacceptable.

(Circularity aside, it's not even clear that the modified definition is correct. I have freely decided to continue to work on this chapter. My decision was caused by my desire to complete this book. Is it really true that I

have freely chosen this desire? I doubt it. I want to complete the book simply because that's the kind of guy I am. I didn't choose to have this desire; I just find myself having it. But this doesn't seem to undermine the fact that my decision to continue working is free.)

What about this then: a free action is one that is caused by the person's beliefs and desires, provided that the person was not compelled by another person to have those beliefs and desires? This new definition raises as

many questions as it answers. What does the word ‘compelled’ mean here? (Philosophers always ask questions like this.) When you think about it, ‘compelled’ in its ordinary sense means something like: ‘caused so as to destroy freedom’. But then it is circular to define ‘free’ in terms of ‘compelled’, for ‘compelled’ is itself defined in terms of ‘free’. The circularity is not so blatant as when the word ‘free’ itself was used in the definition, but it is

circularity all the same. So the compatibilist had better not be using ‘compelled’ in its ordinary sense.

The definition would not be circular if ‘compelled’ just meant ‘caused’. But then the definition wouldn’t work. Recall my free decision to continue to work on this chapter. The definition requires that this decision is caused by my beliefs and desires, and it is—by my desire to complete the book. The definition further requires that this desire is not

caused by any other person. But one of the causes of this desire does involve other people: my parents instilled diligence and a love of learning in me. So if causal involvement by another person renders a desire compelled, then my desire to continue working is compelled. We all believe and desire as we do in part because of our causal interactions with others; no one is an island. So if ‘compelled’ meant ‘caused’, the definition would imply that no one ever does

anything freely. That's not what the compatibilist intends.

Another problem with the definition is that not all compulsion is by another person. A kleptomaniac compulsively desires to steal, and so steals. But he is not free; he cannot help his compulsive desires. Yet the definition counts him as free. For his stealing is caused by his beliefs and desires, and he is not compelled by another person to have those beliefs and desires. We could just

delete 'by another person'. The definition would then read: a free action is one that is caused by the person's beliefs and desires, provided that the person was not compelled to have those beliefs and desires. But the problem of the meaning of 'compelled' remains. It cannot mean 'caused' (given determinism, all beliefs and desires are caused). It cannot mean 'caused so as to not destroy freedom' (that would be circular). Let's take one final crack at a

definition: a free action is one that is caused by the person's beliefs and desires, provided that those beliefs and desires flow from 'who the person is'. The idea of 'who the person is' needs to be explained. As a human being moves toward adulthood, she gradually develops her character, her moral beliefs and habits, her self-conception, and other qualities that give her 'an identity'. It is these qualities, which make her distinctive from a personal and moral point of view,

that I am referring to when I speak of who a person is. Who an adult person is is partly a matter of upbringing and circumstance, but also partly a matter of choice. As we mature we shape ourselves; and even after reaching adulthood we continue to reflect on ourselves, and try to change if we aren't living up to our ideals. So when the definition says that the beliefs and desires must flow from who the person is, this means that the

beliefs and desires must be ‘in character’ for that person: they must fit with the character, moral beliefs and habits, and self-conception that the person has shaped for herself over time (and continues to fine-tune). In the example at the beginning of the chapter, after you snap out of your hypnotized state, you will be inclined to protest that poisoning the second victim does not result from ‘who you are’. It is out of character for you. Even though you desired to

poison him at the time (because of the hypnosis), that desire conflicts with the values by which you have always lived. The case of the kleptomaniac is trickier, but here too we can say that even though her thievery is caused by her beliefs and desires, it may not be free. For suppose that even though she has always found herself desiring to steal, this desire has always been unwelcome to her. She has always tried to resist the desires—sometimes

successfully, but unfortunately, sometimes not. Further, suppose that she believes that stealing is morally wrong. Given all these facts about who she is—her moral beliefs, her desire not to desire to steal, and her pattern of resisting her desires to steal—the desire to steal does not flow from ‘who she is’. The definition therefore says that her stealing is not free. This last definition may be on the right track, but there is still work to be done. First, the definition says that your

desires under hypnosis do not flow from 'who you are' because they do not match the desires you usually have; they are uncharacteristic. But many perfectly ordinary free actions are caused by uncharacteristic desires. Though I am generally a nice person, a couple of times in my life I have irritably snapped at someone. Despite being uncharacteristic for me, my snapping was obviously a free action. So my desire to snap had better count as

flowing from ‘who I am’. Somehow, the definition must treat my desire to snap differently from your hypnotized desire to poison—even though each desire is out of character.

Second, compare two ways of changing ‘who one is’. Way one: someone permanently brainwashes me into becoming a horrible person. The brainwashing is so thorough that for the rest of my life I want nothing more than to harm people. At first, my actions seem out of character. But soon

everyone forgets my former good qualities and regards me as a monster. Are my subsequent actions free? The question is hard, but it seems that they are at least partially unfree, since the new, evil 'who I am' results from brainwashing. Way two: I undergo moral transformation. After recognizing that my life is going badly and in need of reform, I change 'who I am', perhaps with the help of a spiritual leader, therapist, or other moral guide. (Moral transformation can

also go from better to worse: we have all heard stories of promising young people who make the wrong decisions, fall in with the wrong crowd, and become self-destructive and immoral. The members of the ‘wrong crowd’ serve as negative moral ‘guides’.) Unlike brainwashing, moral transformation does not destroy free will. But in each case, one acts in accordance with ‘who one is’, though that has changed under the influence of other people. Somehow, the

definition must treat these cases differently.

Coming up with a good compatibilist definition of freedom is no piece of cake. Then again, who ever said it should be easy? Defining anything interesting is hard. (A few paragraphs ago, we couldn't even define a measly word like 'contact'.) And look at the alternatives to compatibilism: libertarianism ('I know from my armchair that physics is incomplete!') and hard determinism ('I reject everything good about

humanity!). If our first attempts to give a compatibilist definition of freedom don't succeed, we should just keep trying.

## **FURTHER READING**

Gary Watson's anthology *Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1982) contains a number of interesting papers on free will. See especially the papers by Roderick Chisholm, Peter van Inwagen, A. J. Ayer, and Susan Wolf. Chisholm defends libertarianism, van Inwagen gives a careful

argument against compatibilism, Ayer defends a simple form of compatibilism, and Wolf defends a sophisticated form of compatibilism and also discusses compatibilist definitions of freedom like the final one discussed in the chapter.

Timothy O'Connor , Persons and Causes (Oxford University Press, 2000) defends libertarianism.

- 1 Chapter 9 discusses laws of nature.
- 2 The use of the word 'libertarian' in politics is

unrelated.